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ABSTRACT

Frequently, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs for adults use volunteers as primary or auxiliary providers of instruction. Two primary national volunteer organizations and a number of other national organizations support volunteer ESL and basic literacy instruction, and many states have literacy councils that coordinate and provide technical assistance to community-based organizations. Many of these groups also provide literacy instruction for native English-speakers. Instruction is most often individual or provided in small groups. Community sites, workplace settings, residential centers, correctional institutions, and learners' home are used as instructional settings. Adults served by the volunteer programs reflect the diverse population seeking ESL instruction throughout the United States. Instruction tends to focus on oral skills, but also addresses initial literacy skills, and uses a wide variety of materials and instructional approaches. Although volunteer training varies, most is done in small groups and brief pre-service workshops. Training focuses on effective teaching practices, needs assessment, lesson planning, peer practice, and materials selection. Theoretical presentations may also be provided. Volunteer programs often help meet excess demand for ESL instruction, facing challenges similar to those of other ESL programs: limited resources, high turnover, and limited student contact. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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# English as a Second Language in Volunteer-Based Programs

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In many parts of the United States, the demand for adult English as a second language (ESL) instruction outstrips the supply (Fitzgerald, 1995). Proposed and actual legislation at state and federal levels (which includes budget cuts and welfare and immigration reform) is expected to increase this imbalance and to place great strains on adult ESL providers. As programs struggle to provide needed services with shrinking funds, the role of volunteers in teaching adult ESL may be expanded.

ESL programs for adults use volunteers either as auxiliary or primary providers of instruction. When volunteers are auxiliary, they function as bilingual aides, as tutors to provide individualized attention, or as group leaders. *Volunteer-based programs*, on the other hand, provide all instruction through volunteer tutoring. This digest will focus on volunteer-based ESL instruction, looking at who offers this instruction, what is taught, how instructors are trained, what the benefits and challenges are, and what the future looks like.

## Organizations Providing Volunteer-Based ESL

The two primary national volunteer organizations providing support to adult ESL programs are Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA). Other national organizations support volunteer ESL and basic literacy instruction as well. Among them are the National Southern Baptist Convention, the Mormon Church, and the Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education (SCALE) which uses college students to provide volunteer ESL instruction for adults from the college or surrounding community. Many states (e.g., Virginia, Minnesota, Michigan, Indiana) have literacy councils that coordinate and provide technical assistance to various community-based organizations. At a grassroots level, ESL instruction is most often provided by independent, self-supporting volunteer-based literacy programs affiliated with one of the national literacy organizations. Many also provide literacy instruction for native English speakers. Other volunteer ESL programs are provided under the auspices of community institutions—libraries, refugee resettlement agencies, YMCAs and YWCAs, religious institutions, housing projects, community centers, and social service agencies.

## Characteristics of Volunteer-Based ESL Instruction

Volunteer-based ESL instruction is marked by variety in instructional models used, content and skills taught, approaches and materials used, class settings, and learners served.

*Instructional Model*

One-to-one instruction (one tutor working with one learner) was the original model for working with native English-speaking adults learning to read and became the accepted model for ESL as well. It remains popular, in many cases, because it minimizes a tutor's concerns about adequately meeting the variety of needs that a group would present. Increasingly, however, programs are moving to a small-group instruction model, where one instructor works with two to fifteen students. Small-group instruction provides obvious practical benefits but, more importantly, it provides opportunities for activities and approaches (such as problem-solving, collaborative activities, group projects, and other staples of adult ESL instruction) that cannot be implemented in one-to-one situations (Tenenbaum & Strang, 1992).

*Settings*

The most common model is one where ESL instructors and learners meet at any one of a variety of community sites: local libraries, religious institutions, housing centers, community centers, schools or businesses. These institutions may run their own volunteer ESL programs or they may only provide space for instructors and learners who are affiliated with one of the national networks. This collaboration between a literacy program and a community institution may make support services such as transportation and on-site childcare available to the learners. Volunteer programs may also be given space at workplace sites, in residential centers, at correctional institutions, or at learners' homes. These diverse settings make it possible to offer instruction to those who, for financial, medical, psychological, or family reasons, cannot attend school-based programs.

*Learners*

The adults served by volunteer-based programs reflect the diversity of populations seeking ESL instruction throughout the country. In large urban areas, volunteer-based programs are one of many types of programs providing instruction to adult ESL learners; in smaller towns and rural areas, however, volunteer-based programs are often the primary providers of instruction for refugees and immigrants. Individuals in the United States only temporarily—family members of university students, businessmen, or physicians from other countries—also turn to volunteer programs for instruction as do migrant workers whose itinerant lifestyle may preclude admission to programs that require regular attendance.

*Instructional Content*

Volunteer ESL instruction tends to focus on oral skills, although programs also work with learners who are developing initial literacy skills in English. To meet the specific needs of learners (e.g., survival English, citizenship preparation, family literacy), volunteers draw on a wide variety of materials. Some programs encourage the use of a particular core series; others provide a library of materials from which instructors can choose. Although many of their affiliates still follow the more traditional phonics-based approach to reading combined with an audio-lingual approach to oral skills, LLA is increasingly supporting integrated skills instruction through a communicative approach. Similarly, LVA encourages the use of a variety of techniques and approaches, tailoring them to learner needs. Instructors are encouraged to base



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lessons on authentic materials from the community or on materials provided by learners themselves, such as letters from a child's school, ads, a driver's manual, an immigration form, or work memos. Some programs also provide computer-assisted instruction.

## Training for Volunteers

Although the details of volunteer instructor training differ from program to program, there are general characteristics common to most programs. Instructor training is usually done in small groups, rather than individually, and generally consists of a short pre-service workshop of 10-18 hours. The pre-service workshop typically focuses on practical issues such as effective teaching practices, needs assessment, lesson planning, hands-on peer practice, and materials selection. Theoretical presentations stress characteristics of adult and second language learners, and programs try to develop cross-cultural awareness in their instructors (Friedman & Collier, 1993; Reck, 1991).

Most programs match new instructors with learners immediately after the pre-service training and may not have provision for any type of follow-up mentoring or supervision. However, one current training model shortens the number of preliminary training hours and adds hours of supervised instruction or observation of instruction followed by additional workshop hours to complete the training.

While many programs use experienced volunteers to train new instructor volunteers, some combine volunteer and paid staff trainers. Programs also bring in adult ESL teachers or specialists from local colleges to give presentations on specific topics such as grouping strategies, correction techniques, and assessment activities.

## Benefits and Challenges

Volunteer-based programs often serve communities by helping to meet the overflow of demand that adult basic education (ABE) and ESL programs cannot accommodate. In many communities, however, potential ESL learners turn to volunteer-based programs because there is no other program to meet their needs—that is, there is no ESL program that offers instruction at their level of proficiency, at a location they can get to, or on a schedule they can meet, or because they seek more individualized attention or a less traditional form of instruction. Often volunteers can more easily meet the needs of learners who are hard to place in adult ESL classes, such as those with high conversational but low literacy skills. The attention and encouragement provided by volunteer instructors can help build learner confidence and may be a factor in enabling learners to move on to more formal ESL classes. And, the relationship with the instructor may be one of the most important early contacts the immigrant has with Americans.

Volunteer-based ESL programs and programs with paid instructors confront similar difficulties—limited financial resources, high instructor turnover, lack of training standards, and the lack of a research base in adult education (Kutner, 1992). For volunteer-based programs, the training problems may be intensified if there is no paid, professional staff person to manage and train volunteers who have diverse educational backgrounds and varying degrees of experience teaching ESL. Many well-organized, established programs ease their administrative loads and reduce costs by assigning volunteers to tasks such as fund raising, recruiting volunteer instructors and learners, and public relations.

There are drawbacks inherent in the current configuration of most volunteer ESL programs. Instructional contact may be as little as 2-3 hours per week. Since volunteers and their learners often meet in relatively public sites rather than in space dedicated to instruction, instructional materials may be minimal and basic tools such as a blackboard or a tape recorder may not be available. Classes are often open entry, open exit and, like all adult ESL classes, may be multilevel. Finally, when instructors and learners work one-to-one, the learner may feel isolated and may have little opportunity for natural conversation in English. To offset this isolation, some volunteer organizations arrange for groups of learners to gather once a month with their instructors for conversational practice.

## Current Trends

Volunteer ESL programs reflect the trend of learner participation and leadership found in basic literacy volunteer programs and ABE or ESL programs. ESL learners are represented on LLA's New Readers Committee and are starting to participate in local and national literacy conferences as well as in the operation of the programs in which they are studying. Programs are making efforts to attract and train instructors from learners' communities and to use former learners as new instructors. Increasingly, volunteers are young and have full-time, professional jobs in other fields. At the same time, there is growing professionalism among volunteer instructors, in seeking continual training and in participating in professional organizations such as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and its state affiliates.

## Conclusion

Volunteer-based programs often make ESL language and literacy instruction available to learners who do not have access to, or perhaps would not benefit from, regular ESL programs. Although quality, on-going instructor training remains an issue, volunteer-based programs are beginning to look more like ESL programs staffed by paid instructors both in the focus on the learner and in the variety of curricula, instructional approaches, grouping strategies, and classroom activities used.

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